

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
LAWRENCE

INFORMANT: JOHN BLIGHT
INTERVIEWER: YILDERE ERDENER
DATE: MARCH 22, 1989

Y = YILDERE
J = JOHN

SG-LA-T511

Y: Today is March 22nd, [J: Yup] 1989. And my guest is uh, would you tell your name? [J: John Blight] How do you spell your last name. [J: Blight] And uh, these are standards questions I ask you. What is your address? Address, where do you live?

J: Twenty-one Bruce Street, Methuen.

Y: Where do you live, in Methuen? Your birth date?

J: July 16th, 1915.

Y: July?

J: Yup.

Y: In Lawrence?

J: Born in Lawrence.

Y: And uh, what is the ethnic background? Are you, your parents, or grandparents, where did they come from?

J: My parents came from England, [Y: umhm] both sides of my family came from England.

Y: Which, do you know which part of England?

J: Uh, my father came from southern England, [Turkey?]. Or Turk, yeah, Turkey, England, which is in the southern part of England. It's the terrace part down near Dover. It's on the

opposite cliff, the white cliffs of Dover is just opposite it. And my mother's family came from Sherwood. [Y: Sherwood?] Yeah. Up there where Sherwood Forest Robin Hoods.

Y: Yeah. When did they come, any estimation?

J: 1900's I guess. [Y: 1900's] Yeah.

Y: Sometimes there are (--)

J: Cause let's see now. Yeah, my mother, my mother was born in Rhode Island. And you know, in the 1912 Strike she was working. So she must have been twelve or fourteen years old then.

Y: Yeah. So she was born in Rhode Island, but uh, (--)

J: Yeah, but she moved on to Lawrence. She was born in [Peacedale?] and then she moved up here.

Y: So your grandparents came from uh, [J: England] England, right.

J: Yeah, yeah. Not my parents, no.

Y: Not your parents.

J: My father did. My father's side, my father came from England.

Y: Your father did?

J: They came from England. He came over with, he brought some horses over. He was, studied Horticulture in England and Horsemanship and such. And a gentleman from Lawrence went over and bought some horses. And so he came over with the horses.

Y: Yeah.

J: That's what brought my father to this country. And on my mother's side they came over here, they were textile workers.

Y: [Clears throat] Sorry. In the stories, sometimes there are stories, family stories about how the family came over. Is there such a thing, your family, people, your father or mother, or grandparents used to tell? How the people emigrated from the old country to the United States? [Clears throat]

J: Well not in particular.

Y: And you said you went to school [J: in Lawrence] in Lawrence. Where, grammar school (--)

J: Hood School, Hood Grammar School.

Y: Where is this uh (--)

J: The Hood Grammar School. And it's been taken down. That used to be on Park Street.

Y: Hood uh, H O O D?

J: Hood, H O O D, yeah. Hood Grammar.

Y: Why did they take it down?

J: They took it down and there's two apartment houses sitting there now. Between Saunders or Park Street, between Saunders and Bruce. [Y: Uh huh] And as I quoted before, I live on Bruce Street, Methuen. I moved from Bruce Street in Lawrence, to Bruce Street, Methuen.

Y: That's interesting.

J: And that's my last oh, sixty-years address. [Laughs] The Bruce Streets.

Y: And after the grammar school you went to uh (--)

J: Two years of Lawrence High. [Y: Yeah] And then I left after my sophomore year, I was sixteen, and we wasn't called dropouts. It was time to go to work.

Y: It was uh, yeah, it was the year 1931 you said?

J: Right.

Y: That was the great depression years?

J: Yup, that was during the depression. I didn't, I didn't have a new suit to wear the third year of high school. I had been given a new suit for my sophomore year, and I earned that by shoveling snow for a gentleman. I shoveled. I took care of his driveway and his sidewalks for the suit he bought me so I could complete my sophomore year. After that I didn't have no suit to go back in the fall. So we had a dress code then. You wore a suit to high school, and tie.

Y: Tie too?

J: Oh yes, yes. During those years how you wore a full dressed suit to school.

Y: Hm. So let me go faster over this question and then we'll come back to um, (--) You started working at the age of sixteen. [J: Sixteen] You were a sophomore.

J: Yup, and I finished my sophomore year, right.

Y: Right. And uh, did you get married?

J: No, no, no.

Y: Never married.

J: Not married until after, during the war.

Y: During the World War II.

J: World War II. Yup.

Y: What is your wife's name?

J: Lillian.

Y: Lillian. [J: Yeah] Yeah. Do you know the birth date? I don't know my wife's birth date.

J: Oh, July 1st, 1915.

Y: 15, the same year?

J: No, 1914. [Y: 14] 14. July 1, 1914, and I was July 16, 1915. She's a year older than me.

Y: In Lawrence? [J: Yes] She was born in Lawrence. Do you remember your parents birth dates?

J: Oh, yeah. My mother's is the 30th of October.

Y: What year? I mean uh (--)

J: I couldn't, not off quick, off hand, no.

Y: Yeah, that's okay. And what was your father's name?

J: Uh, William Henry.

Y: William Henry. Mother's name?

J: Alice. [Y: Alyson] Alice.

Y: Alice. Do you have children? [J: Hm?] Children?

J: No.

Y: Okay. Um, let's go back to uh, 1931. So your are sixteen years old, a young person. How did you find a job? I mean in those days uh (--)

J: Oh, walk around and look for them. Ask, go ask, go ask. There used to be, over here at the mills they'd be maybe thirty or forty people there every morning standing waiting to see who would be hired, no matter where you went.

Y: You just went from one mill to the other.

J: To the other, yeah. And see the employment agent. Be there at seven o'clock in the morning. And if somebody didn't come in they're hire you maybe for the day, or you might get hired for permanently.

Y: One day, or permanently?

J: Permanently, yeah.

Y: And uh, so the first place you worked uh, which mill did you work?

J: Well I worked in a toy shop.

Y: Toy shop, right. Yeah, you were telling me about the uh, fingers. [J: Yeah] What happened to the fingers?

J: Well I cut my fingers one time, nothing serious, but it was a sweat shop.

Y: That was the first job you had?

J: That was the first job I really had, yeah.

Y: How long did you work?

J: Oh, I worked there about three months.

Y: So it took care of that.

J: Yeah, after that I didn't like it. So I left it and I went to work in a, helped with an ice truck. And then I did this and did that. And finally uh, oh, I must have been eighteen years old, I started to work for a mason contractor. And the following winter I got a job in the Wood Mill, what they called bobbin boy, picking up bobbins. And I did that for three consecutive years. [Y: Three?] Yeah. In the wintertime I used to work in the mill, and in the summertime I used to work as a mason with the contractors, yeah.

Y: So uh, in the Wood Mill then, you stayed three years. [J: In the winters, yeah] And then after (--) And you mentioned the ice company. What was uh, you said you worked with the ice company?

J: Yeah. We used to cut ice. We used to sell ice by a chunk with horse and wagon.

Y: Before the refrigerators (--)

J: Yup.

Y: Can you tell me a little bit more. I'm interested in that uh, where did you cut the ice?

J: On the pond, from the lakes, from the river.

Y: Merrimack River?

J: Yup. I'm being truthful with you, I am going to take a picture over to the Tribune, you know, guess what it is? I got a picture of the ice house I found yesterday and I'd like to take that over to the Tribune.

Y: Yeah. Did you cut the ice, or you just (--)

J: You cut the ice, we cut the ice, yup. Hey, that's an idea too. I got the saw, the ice saw that we used to hitch the two horses up to that marked the ice. And I also got the saw that we used to finish cutting by hand. You seen pictures of them kids cutting ice anywhere? No? We used to take (--). Do you want this on tape? [Y: Yeah] Uh, we'd take it up here on the river, Merrimack River, when it used to freeze over. And if we got snow, the snow would insulate the ice so it wouldn't get thicker. So what we used to do is go out and punch the ice. Punch a hole in the ice and leave the water come through so the snow would freeze, now the ice would build up. Now if we got too much snow on it we had a plane, what we called a plane. It was made up of a series of teeth, and we hitched that behind a horse, team of horses and we take off. There'd be four inches of the snow ice, because the snow ice we couldn't sell. Then we'd take two and line it up. First we used to do it by horse, a team of horses. And this saw, there was a series about eight feet long, a series of teeth. And that was behind the horse, and draw a line like that down, and cutting. That would cut about eight or nine inches deep. Then we'd cut the opposite way. There was two sizes of ice. Some kid would cut the three hundred pound bar, some people cut the hundred and fifty pound bar. The three hundred pound bar were three foot by three foot and whatever thickness the ice was. You had twelve inches of ice, fourteen inches of ice, that was it. Then you had your other, there were some smaller companies, they cut it half that size. They used to be maybe twenty inches wide, and three feet long. And that's be a hundred and fifty pounds five. And they'd mark it off. And then we'd take and cut it by hand at the ice (--). As I said, it would cut down nine inches by horse. The other few inches [woman's voice sounds off over intercom system] they'd cut along and cut it in big floats. Then they used to float it over to the house, the ice house. And they had a need bar. It wasn't hand sawed all the way through. That was only sawed half bar. You could drive a needle bar in and snap the bar off. And then they used to float over and go over an escalator and haul the ice up to the roof, up to the floor that they was putting in. And as it went through different sheds, the man would take a bar and pull it in. And inside the houseman would line the ice up one on top of the other, all the way up, because they would freeze together during the winter and spring. Then when it got to the top they used to cover it with maybe about three feet of hay. And the ways was made of twenty inches of sawdust. We didn't have insulation like we have today.

Y: Twenty inches of what?

J: Sawdust. [Y: Uh huh] We have inside wall, and outside wall of wood. And that was filled with sawdust. And that's what kept the sun out all summer until we take the bars out and take them around. We usually take them with a team of horses and go up and down the streets. And people would buy, they'd either have a small chest that would take a quarter of a bar, or a half a bar, or depend how big their ice box was. And they used to put, they had cards, an ice card. And they put the ice card in your window if you wanted a piece of ice that day. And on the ice card it was marked. And the way you stood it up was the size, the piece of ice I'd bring in the house.

Y: So you looked at the window and tried to see the sign?

J: Yeah. If they turned it up that way it would be fifty uh, a big piece, laying flat it was a small piece. And (--)

Y: And what was your position? You cut and then you also uh, delivered the ice?

J: Well during the winter we'd cut and put it on the wagon. And then in the summertime we'd help the, I was only a young man, so I'd help the teamster [Y: Yeah] on busy days.

Y: [Clears throat] When was that? 1932, or 30?

J: 32, to 35, 40.

Y: I thought you worked in the mill?

J: Well I mean they didn't, that's the time they was doing all of that. Yeah, I didn't work at it all the time. When I had, when I was out of work I did.

Y: There's so many noise. Uh. And uh, so uh, while you were working (--)

J: Well [unclear] right, I didn't work on the wagon. But we used to always in the wintertime, if I didn't have a job in the mill, I used to go up there and help cut ice.

Y: Can you tell me a little bit more about conditions in the mills, in the Wood Mill? Do you remember uh, (--)

J: The conditions? [Y: Yeah] Well the conditions when I worked in the mill, it wasn't that bad. No.

Y: The Wood Mill? [J: Yeah] Yeah. So your job was (--)

J: Picking up the bobbins. I had so many, each weaver had six looms. And I maybe had to take care of maybe fifteen weavers. Well six times fifteen, you know, a hundred looms I'd have to take care of. And there'd be a hundred tins I'd have to dump. And when I came in in the

morning, most of them would be filled from the night crew. Well I'd get them emptied and I, you would empty them maybe twice a day. And we used to have to take all the thread off the bobbins before we put them, took them away. We used to dump them out, and take all the thread off, and make sure the bobbins are clean to go back to the spinning room. And then if I had any spare time I'd go and help a weaver. And that's how we learned to weave.

Y: So you became a weaver later?

J: Yeah. I worked, did some weaving, yes. But I never worked at it at a full trade, no. [Y: Yeah] If a weaver stayed out sick and I was working on bobbins the boss would put me on a set of looms, keep the looms running until that weaver came back, maybe a day or two, or two days. And then sometimes he'd maybe leave me on for a week or two weeks.

Y: Then uh, how long all together did you work in the mills then?

J: Oh, about four years. Three or four years.

Y: Three or four years, and then you (--)

J: Forgot about them. I stayed in construction continuously.

Y: Right. You did not like it, that's why?

J: Yeah, no. I didn't care for inside. I like the construction.

Y: Construction. And uh, how did you learn then the masonry? How did you learn uh (--)

J: I was working with the mason contractor and he taught me.

Y: Umhm. And uh, in terms of free time, in your spare time, did you have, you said you got married in 1940, '41?

J: '47. [Y: '47?] Uh, '40, '45. '45, during the war.

Y: Did you go to join the, did you go somewhere for uh, did you join the army?

J: I was in the Navy. Oh yeah, yes. I was in the war. Oh yes, yeah.

Y: Where were you?

J: I was in the CB's. I was Chief Petty Officer in the CB's. Navy Construction Battalion.

Y: So your whole life has uh (--)

J: My life has been, for the few years I worked in the mill, right, I have been in construction ever since then.

Y: And then you became the secretary?

J: I was secretary, financial secretary for brick layers. I was corresponding secretary, then I was financial secretary for brick layers for about eleven years, until such times as the International Union uh, consolidated the different locals. Because as the wages grew, your officers wages grew also. So to keep a business agent on the road continuously now you have to pay uh, over a hundred and fifty dollars a week for his salary. And the few members in Lawrence couldn't support a business agent like that and a secretary. And then we got in to having the Health and Welfare, and the pension plan. Then we had to have secretaries. So a local with only a few members couldn't support one. So what the International did was consolidate the different locals into big locals. And like the Lawrence Local was dissolved and moved to Lynn. And in Lynn, no they dissolved, and Haverhill moved to Lynn. now you had a Lynn local of maybe three hundred members who could support a full time business agent, full time secretary and such. You couldn't do it with a few members. That's the reason why the international consolidated all the trades. [Y: Why didn't] And at that time I had already left the trade and took the job with the state as State Building Inspector, see. [Y: As uh, state] State Building Inspector. And uh, continued that, I stayed with the state. The State Building Inspector. I was also Financial Secretary, because it was only taking care of the dues and paying the bills for the union and such. And I did that up until they dissolved the local. And then after that I didn't bother with the union no more, because I wasn't working at the trade and the dues went up to I think it was fourteen dollars a month dues. And when you wasn't working at the trade it wasn't, wouldn't be profitable. So I left the union then. And I retired from the state in '81.

Y: In 1981.

J: Yeah. See I turned, I was with the Department of Public Safety. And we had two State Police powers. So therefore when we turned sixty-five they didn't care for you being on, because that was a rule at the time, which was a good rule. You had your pension coming, you might as well take it. And it gave room. Naturally a person over 65 years of age can't climb like a person younger than that. And being a building inspector you should be able to climb, go here and go there, and the other thing. Since then I have to take any short term jobs as Clerk of Works.

Y: But you are retired as the Inspector of (--)

J: State Building Inspector. That's what I retired, yeah.

Y: What did you look for? I mean what did you inspect in uh (--)

J: Well at that time well we had to inspect all new construction. Uh, (--)

Y: I mean what uh, what exactly did you look for if you went (--)

J: [Unclear]. The occupancy, how that building was kept up. The power plant. The this and that. Well everything throughout the whole building.

Y: Why the name International?

J: Hm?

Y: Why the name. Why did they call International Union?

J: Oh the International?

Y: Yeah. It was really International, or it was just uh (--)

J: United States. Their office is in Washington, D.C.

Y: Yeah.

J: And they have all the brick layers throughout the United States.

Y: So it was not really international involvement of the union, it was just within the United States. Wasn't it?

J: Yeah. Yeah.

Y: Yeah. And uh, after the retirement you take jobs related to your background experience?

J: Yeah, on my experience, yeah. [Y: Yeah] Mostly, I don't look for it, you know what I'm saying? I don't go out looking for work.

Y: They call you? Well that's nice.

J: Yeah. Like the engineer for this building here, Mr. Lambert, he knew me from dealing with me as a State Inspector. And so he asked me if I wanted, was interested in it. It was going to be a short time job, maybe six months, eight months. I said oh yeah, all right! Now I just finished the one up the hospital, Alder Family Hospital in Methuen. Mr. Lane, who's the administrator, knew me. And he called me, asked me if I was doing anything last spring. And when I started in May it was assumed that I'd be all done for the first of December. But through some difficulties it ran a little longer. Uh, the same thing, I was over here at the [unclear] Center in Andover. I formerly had worked for that architect years ago. So [coughs] when I [unclear] he knew I was retired, so he asked me for it.

Y: Do you know what this building was before?

J: Yeah?

Y: What was it?

J: This was a dormitory for immigrant women.

Y: So where were the rooms?

J: [Comment unclear]

Y: They were? [J: Yeah] Do you know how many rooms?

J: No. Best example of that is we went up the men's dormitory up the next, up the corner up here they're just fixing up now.

Y: Uh, the uh, oh yeah, that was men's dormitory?

J: That was the men's dormitory.

Y: And that was women's?

J: That was identical to this.

Y: Yeah.

J: But they took the dormer windows off of this. That one still has dormer windows on, right? Yeah.

Y: And where else, do you know where else were other such buildings in Lawrence?

J: Oh I don't know.

Y: I know this one here, that was a dormitory. I know also the other one you mentioned. There must have been other dormitories, but uh, (--)

J: Oh I think there was more or less, there was a lot more rumor houses, but they wasn't owned by the mills. They were privately owned.

Y: Yeah. I guess the Yankee girls came and lived here, or?

J: Yup. The girls from other countries.

Y: Other countries? I thought you know, they came from farm from New Hampshire and (--)

J: Oh no, no, no. Immigrant women.

Y: Immigrant women?

J: Immigrant women?

Y: Umhm, yeah. And all these jobs you did (--)

J: Uh, this is uh, Charlie [Petercali], who was a fireman, I know his mother lived here when she first came over here.

Y: Oh yeah, is she alive?

J: No, I don't think so, no.

Y: It would be interesting to talk to someone who used to live here.

J: Yeah, well his mother used to live here.

Y: And all of these jobs you did, um, which one uh, you know, people talk about satisfaction. You know, if you do something you feel good. And was there such a thing when you worked? Well start from the toy shop and then textile mills.

J: Well the thing I enjoyed the most was my last years as State Building Inspector. [Coughs]

Y: You have the same problem, yeah.

J: Uh, the reason being was that I had become acquainted with a lot of the international organizations.

Y: International organizations?

J: Like BOCA, which is Building Official Conference of America. And they are spread out now through mostly all the world.

Y: Walter you say?

J: BOCA.

Y: BOCA?

J: Yeah, B O C A. Building Official Conference of American. It's uh, they write building codes. They write plumbing codes. They write electrical codes. They write my tailor's codes, what fire protection codes. And it's an organization of building inspectors. And uh, I took all of the conferences in, and the class in, and uh, it was very interesting in my last, I'd say the last ten, twelve years as State Building Inspector. The new type of buildings that's going up was interesting, and the [unclear] of them. And your hospitals, far more safety was put into hospitals. Far more safety was put into your nursing homes. I'd say from uh, oh, from 1975 to when the State Building Code came into being, prior to that was a code before, but then again there was a local building code. Then it was compulsory that all cities and towns take the state building code in 1975. That's when there was a big change in the maintenance of buildings and the upkeep of buildings. That was most interesting out of my life I think.

Y: So uh, you know, we talk about the meaning of work. How, what, what did your job, I don't

know that's a hard question to answer. What did your job mean to you? I mean uh, when you were working in textile mills? Did it mean anything?

J: No. It was just mainly that I could make a living. It's something that could make some money to eat.

Y: And then later when you became a(--)

J: A brick layer. Well naturally it was achievement. You help build something.

Y: I mean building something, producing.

J: Produce, production, yeah. Your production, your production was visible. You could see what you did. And naturally if you built a corner of a building, it was something that you remembered. You built that corner of the building. And such as things like that.

Y: I mean, very proud that you?

J: Yeah, proud that you did it, yeah. Brick layers are very proud of their work.

Y: Are they?

J: Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah.

Y: If they do a good job. If they don't they cannot be.

J: Yeah, yeah, no.

Y: That's another thing people talk about. Uh, pride, you know. Uh, (--)

J: They took a lot of pride in their work, the, in construction. Whereas in the mill you were just another person, another number. That's why I didn't care too much about it.

Y: Another number? What do you mean by the number?

J: Well that's all. You was another weaver. You never seen a piece of cloth you wove after you came out of your loom.

Y: You never seen it?

J: No. Well you see it until it leaves your loom, and then it went to the purser. And after that you didn't know what happened to it. Whereas on the brick work, if you build something (--) I had built a hundred odd fire places around, and I'm still proud of them fire places I built, and steps I built, and front of buildings I built.

Y: Yeah, that's interesting. Because in uh, (--)

J: And in construction you had something, you did something. And that's the, as I say, I left that for being a State Building Inspector. And as I say, the State Building Inspector, it was a feeling that you have improved the safety of people.

Y: That was the feeling you got?

J: Yeah, you got for (--) You went in a building where it was dangerous. That the owner wasn't keeping the egress properly, so that people could get out in the fire. Or the fire alarm wasn't working right.

end of side one
side two begins

Y: You were a brick layer. I mean later you became the state uh (--)

J: No, it wasn't the same kind of pride. It was a different pride. If something uh, on a brick layer you could see your work, and other people could see your work, and everybody knew you did it. And uh, but as a building inspector it was your inward feeling.

Y: Yeah.

J: As a building inspector you don't go around making friends. You don't make enemies per se, but when you go and make people do things that they, you don't make friends at that particular time, until they realize that what you had made them do, it would help them.

Y: How many realizes that? I mean (--)

J: A certain person, a certain building in Greater Lawrence, it was a big Inn and a big restaurant. And wood structure, old wood structure, a beautiful building. And I convinced the owner that he had to have a sprinkler system throughout the whole building. And as I did that I informed him he could save on insurance. It was surprising, he called me up one day and wanted me to come down Saturday morning, wanted me to come down and see him. I had to come right away, it was urgent. He just got the bill from the insurance company. So I went down, had a cup of coffee and he took the bill out. And he had saved \$6,000 on his insurance by adding the sprinkler system. So then I was a hero. Prior to then I was Mr. Meanie making him put the sprinkler system in, even though huh, should they'd had a fire he would have lost the building. And after the sprinkler system, a sprinkler system does put out a fire.

Y: Yeah. Although you said one couldn't make friend, but you said you still like that job. It was one of your (--)

J: You're inner feelings. All right let me tell you an example. Uh, I had the pleasure of the first kindergarten inspection in Medford, Mass. We had a woman from L A Pearson School, we had

the Public Health Officer, and we went around. Well the worst kindergarten I found was at a big college. And that's the one I closed, the reason being, if I had closed any of the other little ones, they would never made the paper. So I closed the big one and made it known. All the small ones follow suit then. Because those children (--) Prior to that what they had was a piece of blanket. The mothers would drop the kids off and throw them on the floor. So when the mother left, the kid got tired, they give them a blanket and let them sleep. And when we came in with the Day Care Center rules and law, that all changed. So naturally if you cleaned up such places your inner feelings when you went home at night, you can say, when I did protect them children today. But nobody patted you on the back for it, because, except your superiors, which was, they stood behind you in everything you did. Yeah. So you were aware of what you were doing actually. That was not uh, yeah. And when, when did you make your friends? During which period? Because as an inspector I can see that uh, people did not like you, did not hate you. So you were someone you know, came and inspected. I can imagine they did not approach you.

J: Approach you too. As I said, on this particular case until he found out that he did make a big savings with his insurance. Remember I told you about the restaurant. As soon as he [unclear] he was making, saving so much money on insurance, I was a good guy.

Y: But how many people realize that. I mean he was maybe (--)

J: At the time, no. After thinking it over and realized what has happened, they do change their attitude towards you.

Y: Yeah.

J: You know I always like to tell the story to people, uh, when the building inspector comes in and introduces himself, he's nothing, no different than the State Trooper, or the police officer that stops you on the road, and you don't know why he stopped you. When he comes up and says to you, do you realize your tail light is out? The same thing as I. I'm coming through your building and when I walk around and say, hey, do you realize those emergency lights ain't working? Do you realize you need a new thread on that stair? That fire escape is rusted out. But as I walk up to the door and say, I'm the State Building Inspector, you automatically put the fence up the same as when the guy stopped you along the road. What did I do, I wasn't going too fast, I haven't been drinking? And when he says your tail light is out, you say, oh gee, thanks for telling me. Right? It's the same thing.

Y: Yeah, that's true. And how many hours did you work? Did you keep forty hours a week?

J: Well a forty hour week, yeah. Yeah.

Y: And uh, you were more or less your own boss?

J: You had a district. And as long as they didn't hear from you, and there was no problems in your district, there was no pushing by your superiors. You had to do the work and keep your district clean. No complaints, no fires, no debts.

Y: So did you go to the office and you got assignment?

J: No, no, no. You kept your own assignments. They didn't give the assignments. You make up, all the buildings in your district you was responsible for. Like I had, in my last years I had from Lowell down to Salisbury, on both sides of the Merrimack. I had Lowell, Dracut, Tewksbury. I had Andover, North Andover, Methuen, Haverhill, Bradford, West Newbury, Merrimack, and all the public buildings, all the nursing homes, and all the schools, all the churches was under my jurisdiction.

Y: I can imagine you got certain respect because you were inspector. I mean they couldn't mess up with you.

J: No, no, you had big respect. And the code at that time were very nicely written. Uh, it didn't say you could go to the District Court. You went to the Superior Court. So if you had, if they had any discussion, they wanted to sue you or anything else, fight getting their license because it wasn't up to par, they had to be prepared to spend some money in court, or do the work. So most of the time it was more profitable to do the work than spend the money with a lawyer going to high court. See, if it had been the district court, hey, no, I ain't going to do it. But being a superior court, that's the way it was written.

Y: I was wondering you know, was it maybe a part, or your reason why you liked the inspector job. Although you did not make a lot of friends, when you were a textile worker, a bobbin setter, who respected you? I mean who respects a bobbin (--)

J: Nobody cared. Yeah, you didn't have that standard, but being a State Building Inspector you had the prestige. Definitely you had the prestige.

Y: Umhm.

J: See you had the same powers as the state police officer, so you had the same, although you did not have a uniform. See the State Building Inspector and the State Boiler Inspector, they was her in the Commonwealth before the State Police. See the Building Inspectors, they go back to 1867, right after the civil war when they started group houses and you started to use steam for power. That's when the Department of Public Safety came into being. And in 1921, after World War I, instead of being State Constables they were Building Inspectors, Boiler Inspectors, uh, Detectives and everything else, all, they call them, they were called State Constables. Then that changed in 1921 and they came under a uniform branch of the State Police.

Y: Yeah. So if you would compare the, I'm trying to compare when you were working at the textile mills, although it is hard to compare, in terms of payment, other benefits. Did you have any insurance, any other benefits while working at the mills?

J: No, no. They had nothing at that time.

Y: When did Social Security Act, and other things came. They were late in 1935 I guess they were introduced.

J: Yeah, '35, '36, '37, right in there, yeah.

Y: But you left the mill (--)

J: At that time. I was working in construction.

Y: Yeah.

J: I still has social security though, and I still have unemployment in construction.

Y: Yeah.

J: See that was under Roosevelt's administration.

Y: Yeah, but the affect came later though. I mean the social security was introduced 1935. But uh, did you start immediately? Do you remember that? No.

J: Yeah.

Y: Do you? So you got immediate social security?

J: Yeah, I put in. At that time naturally we wasn't earning the salaries you earn today. Uh, when I first left the state my social security was small. Because all the time I worked for the state I didn't put no money in the social security. The only money I had put into social security was prior to my appointment with the state. Because see the state don't pay social security, or they don't pay unemployment, because they have their own pension plan.

Y: Did uh, where did your wife work?

J: My wife, my wife worked before, before I met her she worked in the Arlington Mill.

Y: Arlington?

J: Yeah, before we were married. And after we were married she worked very little. She worked for Internal Revenue for a couple of years. And then she worked in a grocery store office for a couple, a year or two. That's about all she did work.

Y: Yeah. You know, talking to former textile workers, one of the main concerns was being laid off. But there wasn't such a thing for you. Did you have concerns that you were laid off? I don't think so. I mean that you would lose your job? Your job security in other words?

J: Well no. See, as a brick layer you had no job security. No job. Brick layers didn't have no job security whatsoever. When they needed you, they hired you. When they didn't need you, they didn't hire you. So due to the fact I learned brick laying at a young age, I was eighteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old, that was etched into my mind. And I never, never looked for job security, because I wasn't brought up that way. The people that worked in the

textile mills, they figured they had a job as long as they lived. And it was a sad(--). When the mills closed down in Lawrence a lot of my friends, it was awful sad for them.

Y: What did they do? I mean sadness, uh, (--)

J: Well there was no job for them. They didn't know nothing else but textiles. There was no more textiles.

Y: Yeah, what I meant was some people start drinking alcohol because they are sad.

J: Oh yes, one person, even one person I knew even committed suicide.

Y: Because of (--)

J: Losing his job.

Y: Where did he work?

J: In the Wood Mill.

Y: Wood mill?

J: Yup. Yup.

Y: Can you tell me a little bit more? I mean I don't need his name, but uh, what was the (--)

J: He was a weaver and he worked, his father was a weaver. His uncle was a weaver. A whole family of Belgian people worked in the mill there, in the Wood Mill. And uh, he had been walking around in a fog for oh, six or eight months after the mill closed down. And finally he did away with himself.

Y: I mean was it really because of the job situation I wonder, or there were maybe other reasons? Who knows?

J: I think more so that it wasn't a job situation, because he was a big healthy man, other people lost their jobs and changed their trade.

Y: How old was he more or less? Uh, thirties, forties?

J: I'd say about his late thirties.

Y: Late thirties?

J: Forty maybe, that's all. It wasn't a great deal older than me.

Y: Yeah, that's uh, how did he kill himself?

J: That's a good (--) I think he hung himself, yeah. We don't have much of that now you know, compared to like we used to.

Y: Um, what?

J: People hanging themselves, or committing suicide.

Y: There are other ways of killing (--) But that is interesting, you know, because um, do you have to go?

J: No, I just was looking. [Y: Yeah] [Few words unclear]

Y: We have a little bit more tape left and then you are released. [Chuckles]

J: No, I got that there charter, I told Jimmy I was giving it to him when I was working here. And that was the original charter of the brick layers.

Y: That is very interesting. And when the mills closed down there were also restaurants and businesses around the Wood Mill and around this area. I guess they all closed down, you know?

J: Oh, when the textile business went out it hurt an awful lot of other things.

Y: Other things like what?

J: Well all right, we'll take for example, Treat Hardware Corporation. Now right now that's a little small outfit, but when the mills were here that was an awful big outfit, because they sold a lot of nuts and bolts to the textile business.

Y: What was the name?

J: Treat Hardware. Treat, T R E A T, Hardware. They're up there on Winter Street, now a little small, in an old building.

Y: It's Broadway and uh, at the corner is that the one?

J: It used to be, yeah. It used to be a big business there. They had a warehouse and everything else. And they told them, they had salesman just going around to the mills. And when the mills went out, and there was no mills, there's no place to sell.

Y: That's good uh, that's good that you are telling me. I did not hear those kinds of comments before. I mean I know that the whole community was affected when the mills closed down.

J: Oh, everything was affected.

Y: Not just the individuals.

J: No, not the people who only worked there, but I mean everything connected to it.

Y: Yeah. What else do you remember?

J: Well (--)

Y: Those small restaurants, I guess they (--)

J: [Coughs to clear throat] The small restaurants, they all went [unclear]. And then you had the, let's see, your wool, all the wool business. Wool handling, this big building that just changed over there, now that was nothing but imported wool. Came in from all over the world. And this building here at that time was used for mending the bags.

Y: Also the population changed I think.

J: Naturally it did away with a lot of teamsters and truckers. A lot of trucking business was lost, because there was no transportation. No need, there was no, need no more transportation. The wool wasn't coming in no more, so they hadn't had to haul it with the trucks no more. [Coughs]

Y: Some people moved away from Lawrence.

J: Oh yeah, yeah.

Y: Didn't they? Do you know anyone who moved away?

J: Not in particular, no.

Y: According to statistics the population went down.

J: Oh yeah, the population went down to a certain extent. Yes.

Y: But I was wondering, where did they go?

J: Well temporarily I had an uncle that moved from Lawrence down to Patterson, New Jersey.

Y: To work there? [Unclear]

J: Yeah, worked in a mill down there. Uh, I don't know how long he was down there. He wasn't down there too long. His wife didn't want to go down there, so he came back up here.

Y: And uh, you probably know when the street cars were taken away from the streets. When was that?

J: Gee, I couldn't tell you the year?

Y: 19 what, thirties, forties?

J: Somewhere in there, yeah. It was before the war. I'd say around '38 and '40.

Y: Before the war?

J: Yeah, '40, '41 maybe. '40. They had no street cars at all. No, we had busses. [Y: And uh] I'd say '37, between '36 and '40. Your busses must have all came in, the street cars were all taken off.

Y: And you joined the Navy in 19 (--)

J: 1941 I joined the Navy.

Y: '41? Was the, when did the war start officially? I mean they officially started the war 19 uh (--)

J: December 7th, wasn't it?

Y: December 7, 1941?

J: Yeah, and I went in 1942, yeah. Yeah.

Y: And you stayed how long?

J: Oh, I was there forty-four months.

Y: Forty-four months.

J: The last of it, oh, the last two, four months I'd say maybe I signed over. I could have came home a few month earlier, but I didn't, because I was out on the South Pacific then. But that's, yeah, I was there forty-four months.

Y: Where, South Pacific?

J: Pacific, yeah.

Y: And did you have the GI Bill when you came back. Did they give you the opportunity to go (--)

J: Well I didn't need nothing, because when I came back being a mason, [Y: But you had the] I had a trade and the work was there.

Y: Yeah, yeah.

J: No, I didn't need the GI Bill, I didn't need the uh (--) Well we were in what they call the 20

Club. They gave all the Veterans \$20.00 a week for unemployment you know, when we first got out of the service. I only collected two checks, that's all. [Laughs]

Y: [Phone rings] I thought it was interesting talking to you, but if you uh, would tell me a little bit about the free time. While you were working in the textile mills, how was your day? It starts in the morning (--) I'm trying to make a comparison [unclear].

J: [Unclear] I had to be at work at six o'clock in the morning, and we used to walk to work.

Y: Everyone walked in those days.

J: Yeah, oh yeah. They didn't even have to plow the streets, because three thousand people walking to work at six o'clock in the morning, the snow got packed down quick. I'll tell you what, I haven't seen condition like that until this year. I'm coming back from Florida and I hit that snowstorm down in Virginia. And they don't have no snow plows down there. And the trucks packed, and the cars packed all the snow down. That reminds me of years ago in Lawrence. People used to go to work at half past five, leave the house at half past five to walk over here. The [unclear] bridge here, the snow would be all packed long before they shoveled it?

Y: Did it snow more in those days?

J: It seemed to, yeah.

Y: So the climate has changed somewhat?

J: The climate has changed a lot.

Y: So the typical day was then to get up in the morning, what uh (--)

J: Yeah, well you got up at four, before five o'clock. And I worked from six o'clock to three o'clock. And then we got home by four. In the wintertime the day was over.

Y: So did you have, what kinds of things did you do after ?

J: Well I went to uh, I belong, well I went to school, high school three nights a week to get my high school [unclear] And then we, I went to join the National Guard. We used to drill Tuesday nights.

Y: National Guard?

J: Yeah. That was another \$1.50 a week. We used to get \$1.50 for each drill.

Y: So when you quite working at the mills, did you have more spare time, or more energy?

J: More spare time, yeah. More time for sports and stuff.

Y: And more time to spend with friends, or with your family, or whatever? [J: Yeah] I wonder how people entertained themselves in those days.

J: Well about that time the radio came into being.

Y: Yeah. So not everyone had [J: radios, no] radios, or telephones, or car. Do you remember when you had (--)

J: They used to, these people used to do things. [Y: together?] Well yeah. We used to visit in the evening.

Y: In what years [unclear]?

J: We talk about the general subjects.

Y: No, I mean in 1930's, 40's, 50's? [J: Yeah] When?

J: In those years, yeah, between 30 and 40. And uh, posterity was coming back by '40.

Y: I guess that's why people talk about isolation, and that neighbors don't know each other and so forth.

J: Oh yeah.

Y: So they entertain each other.

J: Oh positively. Yeah.

Y: They visited (--)

J: Today the people in apartment houses don't know the people next door. But when we lived in apartment, you know, six tenement houses and stuff, them people all knew one another. Or if they didn't live in the say, two tenement house, they knew the people across the street and everybody else knew everybody. But you don't have that today.

Y: I guess you can tell me what tenement house is. I know about the tenement houses, but I don't know why do they use that term? I mean what is the difference between tenement house and a house?

J: Well there was more tenement, more than one apartment in it. We call them apartments today. We called them tenement then.

Y: But tenement doesn't refer to certain things like uh, there was (--)

J: No, you can have a five room apartment, or a five room tenement. It would be identical.

Y: Where was the heat in tenement houses?

J: Tenement houses you usually have your own heat.

Y: In the bedroom?

J: No, you had, usually you had one in the living room and in the kitchen. You had a kitchen stove that you cooked on, and you had a parlor stove that was in the parlor and living room. And uh, naturally your bedroom, one bedroom would be off the parlor. And the bathroom would be off the kitchen, and the other bedroom would be off the kitchen.

Y: So I was curious why people call those houses tenement houses.

J: Well the word "apartment" wasn't used at that time.

Y: That is equivalent of apartment?

J: Yeah. A tenement and apartment I'd say are about practically the same thing. [Y: Yeah] Because you could have a, you could rent a heated up tenement, but see, today are the individual uh, heating of apartments, tenements, tenements had gone out. A lot of that was due to the oil, because in Massachusetts we had a law saying that you could not use an oil burner where the reservoir was in within forty-two inches of it. That was because you go to outside to get three gallon gallons of oil. You bring it in and tip it up side down, and put it in the new reservoir. It was basically all right until the oil in that three gallons of oil became room temperature. When that became room temperature it expanded and spilled on the floor. Now you got a good potential of a fire.

Y: Yeah. Also uh (--)

J: Well look it, I'm going to cut you short because I got to run along.

Y: Right. That's uh (--)

J: I'll drop by and see you and shoot the breeze again sometimes.

end of tape.